

WHITE BY OLIVE SENIOR

"Take me and make me whiter than snow"

Protestant hymn

Nothing comes white here naturally, not unless
you count sea foam or cloud cap-in-hand begging
passage across the blue immensity. No snow-
scapes, sheep don't roam through here. Heaven
is where you have to go to become whiter than
snow. Or so they sing in the chapel. Try telling that

to Miss Dora the laundress who soaks clothes
overnight to let them know who is mistress then
beats them on the big rock and hangs them on
the bush to bleach in the dew. No speck permitted
to pass through her needle-eye scrutiny; the whites
she dips in a rinse of laundry blue to purge them

as sinners do with hyssop. Starch from cassava
grain Miss Dora uses to stiffen the clothes against
the playfulness of breeze that might see them
at their ease on the clothes-line and come tek fass
and undress them. Every week day, Miss Dora's
laundry stays stiff and upstanding on the line,

like flags, in glorious array like cherubim and
seraphim, though Miss Dora don't business with that.
If you try to tell her that Heaven is the place to go
to climb the golden stair, turn sheep in the
shepherd's flock, become whiter than snow, she
will bridle and say, so what wrong with my big rock,

since when you dissatisfy with clothes scrub
on this washboard in tin tub, then how come you
never tell me you don't like how I starch, how I iron,
till now you have to go to some far away place
to obtain satisfaction? No, Miss Dora, you explain

(for Sunday being her rest day she has never darkened church door), Is skin we talking about. If sin wash away in Heaven sinners come whiter than snow. That's how it go. "Hm. Never seen", she will say, "what they call snow or sheep. Some speak of white foam on the sea but poor me never been there yet. Plus if I was to leave the clothes

dirty, go walk bout, inspect the whole world, like them bothersome young girls nowadays, what those fine folk in the church would have to wear come Sunday? Who to wash, starch and iron the frills, who to stiffen the shirt collar, lay the peplum straight, crease the pleat, who to make

even the worst sinner look neat and tidy as they approaching what they call mercy seat, as they walk up to this Heaven, fall in with the flock? And another thing: Is this black skin I been living in from I born. From morning, as you know, the one thing I learn good is laundering. That

mercy seat, that heaven for me is the day I retire from the work and put up my feet. So tell me why I would suddenly want to be climbing up golden stair, join some flock of sheep the first time I setting eye on them. And when I get there, why I would suddenly want my skin to turn white

as this shirt I just done wring out, start look like that sheet on the line? If ever I should arrive at them high-up place there, as a good washer woman I couldn't hold mi tongue, I would duty bound to say, Lord, I glad I reach but I have to beg you Sar, please go easy with the bleach.